



Wildlife Encounters



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BLACK BEAR (*Ursus americanus*)

Description: The black bear is the state mammal of New Mexico. The name "black bear" can be misleading. Black bears actually come in a variety of colors ranging from black and brown, to cinnamon, red, and blonde.



Adults males can weigh up to 400 pounds, but usually average about 250 pounds. Females typically weigh 150-180 pounds. Females give birth to 1 to 2 young every other year after a gestation period of 7 to 8 months. Their paws have 5 toes and 5 claws used for digging up soils and shredding logs in search of insects, grasses, nuts, and other prey items. The bears are omnivorous and their diet varies according to seasonal availability of foods. They have an acute sense of smell. Black bears may live 25-30 years in the wild. The most frequent causes of death are predation by other bears, hunting by humans, and destruction of nuisance bears by humans.

Range: Black bears can be found in many forested areas of New Mexico. Females maintain a range of 5 to 7 square miles and males can occupy an area of 25 square miles or more depending on condition of the habitat. Bears need food, shelter, water, and space to survive and reproduce. When one of these factors is limiting, bears may encroach on areas of human habitation.

THE "BEAR" FACTS

Popularized bears such as Winnie the Pooh, Ben, Snokey, and Yogi have created misconceptions about the true behavior of these wild animals. Black bear attacks on humans are rare, but here are some tips to keep bears and people living happily together in our great state!

Camping:

- Enclose foods that could give off odors in zip-lock bags or Tupperware® containers.
- Set up your tent 30 to 50 yards from cooking areas, if possible.
- Keep your campsite clean at all times.
- Wash dishes as soon as possible.
- Put trash in bear-proof containers (e.g., your vehicle) or hang it between two trees.
- Change clothes after cooking and store dirty clothes in bear-proof containers.
- Keep camera film in your vehicle. Bears are attracted to the smell of film.
- If you take pets or horses, keep their food in bear-proof containers and keep pets tethered.
- DO NOT** keep any food or scented materials (e.g., toothpaste, shampoo) in your tent.

Living in Bear Country:

- Keep pet food inside or in bear-proof containers.
- Bring in bird feed, suet, and hummingbird feeders at night. Hang them between trees instead of the porch.
- Bear-proof your garbage cans. Periodically clean cans with hot water and bleach.
- Clean your barbecue grill and store it inside.
- Do not put fruit, melon rinds, and other smelly items in mulch or compost piles except in winter. Enclose your compost pile if at all possible.
- Pick up and remove fruit from trees as it ripens and/or falls to the ground.
- Surround beehives, chickens, rabbits, etc., with a 5-strand electric fence.

If You Encounter a Bear:

- Stay calm. Move children and pets indoors or to a vehicle.
- If the bear hasn't seen you, calmly move away and leave the area. As you move, talk softly to let the bear discover your presence.
- DO NOT** approach the bear. Back away slowly while facing the bear and talk softly.
- DO NOT** make any sudden movements.
- Avoid eye contact with the bear, as it may perceive this as a threat.
- Bears often run from humans, but may attack if they feel threatened or cornered.
- If you are attacked, **FIGHT BACK!** Bears have been driven away when people have fought back with sticks, rocks, binoculars, and even their bare hands.
- There are bear deterrents available commercially (e.g., pepper spray), but they are only effective at close range and may not keep an angry bear from attacking.



MOUNTAIN LION (*Puma concolor*)

Description: As the scientific name implies, a mountain lion is generally one color – a tawny to light-cinnamon color with black-tipped ears and tail and whitish chest and stomach.



Mountain lions vary in size and weight with adult males reaching 8 feet from head to tip of tail and 150 pounds. Females can reach 7 feet and weigh an average of 90 pounds. Their long tails distinguish them from bobcats, which are also found in New Mexico. Mountain lions give birth year-round to 2 to 3 young after a 3-month gestation period.

Mountain lions, like your typical housecat, have retractable claws. The paw has four toes with three distinct lobes present at the base of each pad. Lions are most active at night (nocturnal). They stalk their prey, which include mule deer, elk, porcupines, small mammals, and even domestic animals such as dogs and cats.

Range: Also known as cougars, pumas, or panthers, this large carnivorous cat is found in all six life zones in New Mexico: alpine, subalpine, coniferous forest, transition, grassland/woodland, and deserts. Individual lions can occupy areas from 10 to 370 square miles depending on the quality of available habitat.

NO "LION": JUST THE FACTS

Humans rarely get more than a brief glimpse of a lion in the wild. Chances are the lion is well aware of you before you are of it, and they tend to avoid contact. Lion attacks on humans are extremely rare and around here, you are more likely to be killed by lightning! However, below are some ways to minimize the negative consequences of human-lion interactions.

Camping & Hiking:

- Walk in groups and make enough noise to prevent surprising a lion.
- Make sure all children are close to adults, preferably within an arm's reach.
- DO NOT** allow children to run far in front of adults. Children's rapid movements and high-pitched voices may make lions mistake them for their typical prey items.
- Take a sturdy walking stick – it can be used as a weapon against a lion.
- NEVER** approach a lion – they are unpredictable, but will usually avoid a confrontation if they have a way out.

Living in Lion Country:

- Closely supervise children. Make sure they are not out after dusk or before dawn.
- Make lots of noise during times when lions are most active or in areas of known encounters.
- Remove vegetation around areas where children or adults frequent. Make it difficult for a lion to approach unseen.
- Install outdoor lighting.
- Close off open spaces below porches or decks.
- Do not feed wildlife – especially deer – so as not to attract lions to a potential prey source.
- Do not let your pets roam around outside. Bring them in at night or provide a secure kennel area.
- Place all livestock in enclosed sheds or barns at night.
- Encourage your neighbors to follow these precautions so as to keep your neighborhood relatively free from lions.

If You Encounter a Mountain Lion:

- Stay calm.
- Stop or back away slowly if you can do so safely.
- Talk calmly, yet firmly, to the lion as you move away slowly.
- Immediately pick up all children off the ground and tell them to stay calm.
- DO NOT RUN** from a lion – fleeing behavior may trigger the instinct of the lion to attack.
- Face the lion and try to look as large as possible. Raise your arms and open your coat if you're wearing one.
- Carry a walking stick and use it to defend yourself if necessary.
- If the lion approaches or behaves aggressively, arm yourself with a stick, throw rocks, and speak louder and more firmly to the lion. Convince the lion you are dominant and a danger to it.
- FIGHT BACK** if the lion attacks. Use any possible weapon (e.g., rocks, sticks, a backpack, your hands). Lions have been driven away by prey that fights back. Try to remain standing. **IF YOU FALL DOWN, GET UP!**



ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK (*Cervus elaphus*)

Description: This impressive-looking animal is second in size only to the moose in the deer family of mammals. The average weight of an adult male is 700 pounds while females average 500 pounds.



Males initiate the autumn courtship (rut) with a bugling call to attract their mates. Females give birth to a single calf after a gestation period of 8 to 9 months. Elk are ruminants (like cows) and, therefore, regurgitate their food to aid in digestion. Their diet includes grasses, forbs, shrubs, and aspen saplings. Foraging occurs primarily in early morning or late evening, although elk are active throughout the day. Elk, like deer, have antlers, which are shed every year (unlike horns). Predators of elk include the mountain lion, gray wolf, and, less frequently, bear. Coyotes and bobcats may occasionally feed on calves or sick/injured adults.

Range: Today, large populations are found only in the western United States from Canada through the Eastern Rockies to New Mexico and in a small region of the northern lower peninsula of Michigan. Elk prefer open woodlands and avoid dense unbroken forests. Elk can be found in riparian areas, clear cuts, aspen-hardwood forests, and coniferous-hardwood forests. Elk migrate during the late-autumn and early-spring periods in response to snowfall depths and food availability. As a result, their home ranges can reach up to 600 square miles.

ELK/DEER ENCOUNTERS

Sometimes people view elk and deer as "tame" because they see them along roadways and even in their backyards! However, these animals are wild and can be unpredictable and "skittish." In Los Alamos, we live in a wildland-urban interface that happens to be prime elk and deer range. Here are some methods to ensure peaceful coexistence with these species:

Living in elk (and Deer) Country:

- Do not feed elk apples, corn, hay, or other food products. Elk are very adaptable and can become nuisance animals if they are presented easy access to "human" food sources.
- Keep hay piles and other livestock food sources in enclosed containers. Do not be fooled – Elk can jump fences up to 8 feet high! Use of electric fencing may deter nuisance elk.
- Observe elk from a distance. Around Los Alamos, elk flee when humans approach on foot. In contrast, they often appear tame when humans approach them in vehicles.
- Pick up and remove fruit from trees as it ripens and/or falls to the ground.
- Keep pets tethered to prevent them from harassing elk.
- BE AWARE WHEN DRIVING!** One of the most significant problems in Los Alamos County is the potential for deer/elk vehicle collisions.

To Prevent Elk/Deer Vehicle Collisions*:

- USE CAUTION WHEN DRIVING IN THE LATE AFTERNOON OR EVENING.** This appears to be the time when most collisions occur due to increased activity of elk/deer and higher volumes of traffic.
- Data suggest more elk collisions occur in the winter whereas deer collisions are more frequent in the fall.
- Be knowledgeable about locations known to have a high number of elk/vehicle incidents. Around Los Alamos, most elk collisions occur on Pajarito Road whereas deer collisions often occur on State Road 4, and Highway 502 (Figure 1).

*Reference: Biggs, J., S. Fryberger, L. Hansen, and C. Bare. 1999. Analysis of animal related vehicle accidents at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Unpublished report. LA-UR-98-819.



Figure 1

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